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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 QUITO 000764

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [EC](#)

SUBJECT: ECUADOR: POLITICAL TEMPERATURE RISING

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney. Reason 1.4 (b&d).

11. (C) Summary: Anti-government protests flared in Quito on April 5, continued on April 6, and are likely to continue April 7. Thus far the GOE has reacted with restraint, using tear gas to disperse protesters attempting to forcibly enter Congress. A national strike was convoked by the opposition Assembly of Quito for April 12, but its scope is still unclear. Guayaquil leaders have convoked an assembly to consider whether to join the strike. The Ambassador is publicly and privately counseling restraint and peaceful dialogue on all sides, but the opposition seems intent on exploiting national outrage over the return of former president Bucaram, to bring down the government. The main indigenous group has announced that it will support anti-government protests, but its members are not yet visible in the streets. The military and police remain loyal to President Gutierrez, who has canceled his trip to Rome, purportedly to preside over definitive resolution of the festering court issue. End Summary.

Clashes Outside Court and Congress

12. (U) On April 5, hundreds of judicial workers protested outside the Supreme Court, and were dispersed by tear gas. Several protesters were reportedly injured and over 100 reportedly suffered from effects of the gas. Later in the day, the Assembly of Quito, led by Quito Mayor Paco Moncayo, declared a national strike for April 12, and led a march of approximately 4,000 on Congress. There the protesters were dispersed by tear gas after attempting to forcibly enter the Congress building to pressure legislators to immediately vacate the Supreme Court. President of Congress Omar Quintana closed the session without discussing the court issue. Inside the Congress building, several opposition legislators temporarily detained and later released the police official assigned to Congress.

13. (SBU) Moncayo later accused the government of talking peace but using violence against protesters and publicly called for the police and military to cease supporting the Gutierrez government and respect the right to peaceful protest. According to an unconfirmed account from Presidential Legal Advisor Carlos Larrea, who called us in alarm, Moncayo also claimed the USG had withdrawn support for the Gutierrez government. We assured him that there had been no change in US policy in support of Ecuadorian democracy. Moncayo convoked another meeting for noon on April 6, to be followed by another march on Congress. Mid-morning on April 6, approximately 4,000 students marched peacefully past the Embassy toward Congress, according to media estimates, later growing to 6,000 before being dispersed by police. Congress held its session and began to debate the government's court reform proposal. The PSC and Socialists reportedly offered to support the bill, but the ID held out for other options.

Indigenous Will Join Protests

14. (U) Indigenous leader Luis Macas declared on April 6 that the main indigenous organization (CONAIE) will mobilize to support anti-government protests, demanding that President Gutierrez leave office, vacate the Supreme Court, annul the Manta FOL agreement and Plan Colombia, and reject pending economic reforms and an FTA with the U.S. The timing of the indigenous mobilization was unclear. On April 5, several Pachakutik party leaders accompanied the march on Congress, but CONAIE's broader membership was not in evidence.

Guayaquil Leaders More Restrained

15. (U) Guayaquil leaders and coastal PSC mayors met on April 5 and declared an assembly for April 11, when they will determine next steps. Their focus is reportedly on the local issues that featured in their "Marcha Blanca" protest in December, in contrast with their counterparts in Quito. Mayor Nebot publicly hedged on the date of any mobilization in Guayaquil, saying only that he thought it should happen in April, but not without sufficient preparation. In a nod to local business interests, Nebot also said any protest should seek only to bring people into the streets, but not paralyze cities.

16. (C) The Ambassador met with a key indigenous leader, Cotacachi mayor Auki Tituana while visiting Imbabura province on April 6. Tituana told her that Bucaram's return was the "last straw" for the indigenous movement, which resented Gutierrez' attempts to divide and marginalize it. Gutierrez had to go, he said, and should be replaced by the Vice President Palacios. The Ambassador emphasized the development costs of political instability and urged Tituana to make another attempt at dialogue with the government. She later told Imbabura press that peaceful dialogue is necessary to strengthen democratic institutions and that the USG continues to support Ecuadorian democracy and the democratically-elected government. The Ambassador's op-ed piece promoting dialogue and judicial strengthening will appear in the paper of record on April 7.

17. (C) The Ambassador spoke with the Chief of National Police Jorge Poveda to urge that the police behave responsibly in handling street protests, which they did. Poveda assured that the police would respect right of protest and even try to encourage dialogue. We are conveying the same message to the military. The DCM met with Minister of Government Oscar Ayerve on April 5 to deliver the same message, which was well received. The political and economic sections and ConGen Guayaquil are reaching out to political leaders across the spectrum to do the same.

18. (C) Ayerve told the DCM that dialogue with the opposition continued, "under the table," but worried that the opposition no longer sought resolution of the court issue. Instead, they seek to destabilize the government by exploiting popular discontent with the return of controversial former president Bucaram. On April 6, Ayerve publicly announced that further dialogue had nearly achieved consensus on a legal reform to vacate the Supreme Court. He welcomed the offer of the Episcopal Conference of Bishops to mediate. The President had cancelled his planned trip to Pope John Paul II's funeral to achieve this resolution.

19. (C) PRIAN congressional leader Sylka Sanchez told PolChief that the PRIAN's working alliance with the government was definitively over. The PRIAN felt tricked by the government for permitting ex-president Bucaram to return. PRIAN leader Alvaro Noboa had refused dialogue with Bucaram since his return. The PRIAN continues to oppose changing the Supreme Court through a congressional resolution, which would be unconstitutional, she said. However, the PRIAN would not support street protests and had no plans to impeach President Gutierrez, according to Sanchez.

Comment

10. (C) Until now, street protests have mainly featured students, judicial and municipal workers, and local leaders of the Democratic Left (ID) and Pachakutik political parties. Quito Mayor Moncayo is leading the attack, clearly seeking to capitalize on outrage over Bucaram's return here in the highlands. A former military leader himself, he crossed a line of restraint by publicly calling on the military to side with protesters. Though ostensibly to pressure Congress to action to resolve the court issue, the protesters are also calling for Gutierrez' resignation. There are no signs that Gutierrez will comply, nor of shifts in the loyalty of the military, the "traditional" arbiter of popular coup attempts here. New involvement by the indigenous movement could strengthen the opposition strike next week (the new CONAIE leadership is untested in this respect).

11. (C) Though time is running out, the government could still placate the forces gathering before the strike on April 12. Despite opposition efforts to convey a common front with Guayaquil and other regions, the likely effectiveness of an indefinite strike is unclear. In the interim, the GOE would be wise to move to resolve the impasse over the court in Congress and heed Guayaquil's local demands to prevent a truly debilitating national strike. We continue to urge dialogue and restraint on all sides, in support of democratic stability.
KENNEY